

Teacher Version

Briefing Memo VIII, Isolationism & the Interwar Period

The “Great” War was the reference point for virtually all American diplomacy during the 1920s. The successful conclusion to a series of international arms control and disarmament conferences gave Americans the sense that their world was now safer. It was not. In 1928, French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg—eventually joined by almost every nation on Earth—signed the *Kellogg–Briand Pact*, which outlawed war. But all the pacts and treaties were an illusion and their gains were temporary at best. Only the treaties which regulated the worst excesses of the last war [*Prohibition against the Use of Gas and Bacteriological Agents in War, Convention between the United States and Other Powers Relating to Prisoners of War*] would have any long-term relevance.

The United States had been shaken by German attempts to undermine U.S. security on its southern boundaries in 1917 and wrestled during the early 1920s with instability in Santo Domingo and Nicaragua. But in 1928, President Coolidge began the slow process of improving U.S. relations with Latin America [*Coolidge Address to the Pan-American Conference*]. The process was nourished by President Hoover on a seven-week goodwill tour, but ultimately credited to President Franklin Roosevelt [*The Policy of the Good Neighbor*]. The change in policy would have important consequences for the United States as the world situation worsened [*Banishing War in the Western Hemisphere, Declaration of Inter-American Solidarity*, and the *Declaration of Lima*].

During World War I, relations with Japan became more troubled when the Japanese took advantage of

American preoccupation with Europe to seize Germany’s Pacific Island possessions and its territory in the Chinese province of Shantung. The Japanese believed that they had a “paramount interest” in China—and they thought that Secretary of State Lansing, agreed with them. In September 1931, Japan staged a minor explosion as a pretext for an invasion of Manchuria [*Japan Invades Manchuria, China Asks for Help*], but the League of Nations did nothing and the United States maintained its distance even while acknowledging the truth of Chinese claims. [*State Department Press Conference on the Chinese Situation, I Desire to Place on the Record*]

The lessons of U.S. hesitation and League of Nations weakness were not lost on Italian Premier Benito Mussolini when Italy invaded the weak nation of Ethiopia in 1935. President Roosevelt sent a letter Mussolini to plead for peace [*FDR Approaches Mussolini*], but was rebuffed [*Mussolini Rejects the American Advance*]. The League of Nations failed to halt the aggression, although the United States—for the first time—sent an observer to the League Council. It made no difference to the situation of Ethiopia, but American isolationists were incensed.

As some Americans realized that the treaties of the 1920s would not protect them from instability [*American Influence and the Prevention of War*], they struggled to develop a system which would provide for American neutrality in any future conflict. [*The United States and the World Community*] In 1935, Congress passed a Neutrality Act prohibiting the sale or transport of armaments to belligerents and warning Americans that overseas travel would be at their own risk; an attempt to prevent the causes of the last war from dragging the United States

into the next one. As the global situation worsened, those provisions were strengthened in 1936. [*The Neutrality Act of 1936*] President Roosevelt told Americans that he was determined to adopt “every practicable” measure to avoid war. [*Pursuing a Policy of Peace*]

In 1938, Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia [*The Fabric of Peace is in Immediate Danger*] and President Roosevelt appealed personally to German Chancellor Adolph Hitler for a peaceful solution [*The Fate of the World Today and Tomorrow, Deeply Shocking News*]. Hitler had no response. Roosevelt tried again to reach out to Hitler not once but twice in April 1939. [*Millions Live in Fear, A Catastrophe Near at Hand*] No response.

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a secret nonaggression pact, which freed Germany to dismember the largely defenseless nation of Poland. The Germans invaded on September 1, 1939 [*I Had Hopes for a Miracle*], and Great Britain and France declared war on September 3rd.

The last furious American debate on neutrality began [*Is Neutrality Possible for America?, Charles Lindbergh on Neutrality and War*], but the President made clear that question was no longer one of avoiding a war or not. It was a matter of national security: “Some of our people like to believe that wars in Europe and in Asia are of no concern to us. But it is a matter of most vital concern to us that European and Asiatic war-makers should not gain control of the oceans which lead to this hemisphere.” It was time to choose a side and there was no doubt—in the President’s mind—what side that would be. [*The Arsenal of Democracy*] ■